DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 037 CS 504 409

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TITLE Defining the Images of Presidential Candidates from Televised Political Spot Advertisements.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Dallas, TX, May 26-30, 1983). For related document, see CS 504 408.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advertising; Content Analysis; Leadership Qualities; *Mass Media Effects; Personality Traits; *Public Opinion; *Qualifications; Television; *Television Commercials; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS *Image Analysis; *Political Advertising; Presidential Campaigns; Presidential Candidates

ABSTRACT

A study examined the images of the 1980 presidential election primaries as expressed by televised political spot advertisements. Systematic coding of image content was completed for all 30- and 60-second commercials during the primary campaign. An advertisement's image score was defined as the number of positive evaluations of words and phrases used which matched terms from a predetermined list of image attributes. The results indicated that most image references were about experience (30.5%) and competence (15.1%). Democratic party dominance in the altruism category was nearly balanced out by the Republican party's dominance in competence. For both parties, the experience, leadership, and competence categories together accounted for over 55% of image mentions. The major image references made on behalf of incumbent Jimmy Carter were to his experience, strength, and honesty. Ronald Reagan was also drawn as a man with great experience. Among the other candidates, Edward Kennedy was portrayed as a caring leader with strong personal qualities, George Bush was characterized as highly competent and experienced, and John Anderson was mainly portrayed as "different" from the mainstream candidates. (HTH)

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DEFINING THE 'IMAGES' OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES FROM TELEVISED POLITICAL SPOT ADVERTISEMENTS

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ED238037

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DEFINING THE 'IMAGES' OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES FROM TELEVISED POLITICAL SPOT ADVERTISEMENTS

Political communication literature has documented dramatic increases in the use of televised political spot advertising, thus highlighting their increasingly important role in modern American political campaigns (Ogden, and Peterson, 1968, pp. 192-3; Patterson, and McClure, 1973, pp. 7-8; Minow, Burch, Corcoran, Heard, Price, 1969, pp. 2, 15; Alexander, 1976, pp. 333-335). Yet in spite of their increased use by candidates and campaign organizations, the value and content of political spots has been the subject of sustained critical debate. Some controversy has concerned the contention that " . . . televised ads fail to provide the voters meaningful information, that they degrade the electoral process. . . that they emphasize image-making while ignoring political issues." (Patterson and McClure, 1973, p. 7.)

Such debate over the value of the image content of political advertisements has been flawed by ambiguity in clearly defining what is meant by the term "image." Few observers argue that political spots are devoid of "images" of candidates. However, discussion often glosses over an important distinction which confounds the way in which the term "image" is used. At least two divergent senses of "image" emerge when the literature is reviewed.

The term "image" is often used in one sense to mean the visual likeness of a candidate. Here, "image" is close to that which is used in the field of photography. Image in this sense is that of a visual impression, a graphic representation. Boorstin uses this sense of "image" (though not exclusively throughout his writing) when he talks of the "Graphic Revolution". "Man's ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images . . . now grew at a fantastic pace . . ." (Boorstin, 1972, 13). In this passage, Boorstin credits the Graphic Revolution with making it possible for images to

be multiplied and vivified by machines which create accurate replicas of face, form, and voice, and with disseminating them as well. The term "image" in this graphic sense, then, has obvious application to televised political spot advertisements in modern political campaigns (Wyckoff, 1968; Rubin, 1967, p. 32).

Another sense of image however, is the different but equally legitimate use of the term to refer to the character attributes of candidates (Napolitan, 1972, p. 154; Ogden and Peterson, 1968, p. 16). From this view, "image" refers to a candidate's "ethos" or "source credibility." Here, a candidate's image is defined as the received or projected cluster of personality traits which defines a candidate's character, role, and personality -- a meaning fundamentally different from "image" in the graphic sense.

In assessing the image content of political commercials (and ultimately their value) then, it becomes necessary to state clearly which meaning of "image" is intended. The concern of this study shall be to describe the image content of the latter type (character attributes of candidates) in political spots presented to the electorate in 1980's American presidential primaries.

TWO IMAGE MODELS

In assessing candidate character attributes researchers have often used semantic instruments (including the semantic differential and Q-sort lists, for example), in order to tap the repertoire of candidate personality traits perceived by respondents. From the receiver's perspective, this perceptual balance model of image has turned up character attributes like the following: trustworthy, honest, experienced, intelligent, wise, strong, active, serious, and the like (Kraus, 1962, pp. 262, 276, 295; Douglas, 1972, p. 10; Nimmo and Savage, 1976, p. 66).

However, whereas "image" has most often been viewed as a receiver-determined construct, it is more fitting in the case of political commercial content to conceptualize candidate images as stimulus-determined and emanating from a source-projected model rather than from a receiver-based origin. That is, a stimulus-determined image theory may be better suited for assessing the image content of political advertising. In agreement with this, McGrath and McGrath have concluded that "perception of political figures are stimulus-determined . . . for a large number of attributes . . ." (McGrath and McGrath, 1962, p. 246). Such a theoretical perspective lends itself to the task of explicating the images of political candidates as they are presented in televised commercials. Furthermore, the continuing upsurge in the use of political commercials invites image researchers to employ source-projected models in assessing images of candidates. Such systematic analysis becomes increasingly important when we realize, as Shneidman has noted, that:

> "We are a nation of millions of television sets; we are a nation of almost constant political elections and intense political interests . . . . Television influences our elections and our international relationships, and it is extremely important for us to know more about the television stimuli that our own political leaders transmit (Shneidman, 1978, p. 178).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions of interest from the foregoing rationale were as follows:

1. What were the images of the 1980 presidential primaries as expressed by televised political spot advertisements?

2. What were the images of the 1980 presidential primaries by party and candidate as expressed by televised political spot advertisements?

In succeeding analyses, the data in this study were treated not as a sample, but as a census.

METHODS

To investigate the images of presidential candidates in 1980's primary spots, videotapes of the 30 and 60 second primary commercials were acquired. Then, systematic coding of image content was completed for all advertisements. The distribution and frequency of candidates spots included for analysis are listed in Table 1 by party and by last office held.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The political spots for 1980 primaries were especially interesting for analysis because they offered a rich source of image expression; with material available from nine campaigns, and an all time high number of primary races operating in the political system, the 1980 election year presented a unique research opportunity.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF IMAGE

An image score was defined for each commercial as: the total number of positive evaluations made of the words and phrases found in the text of each advertisement which matched terms featured in a list (supplied by the analyst) of image attributes. This method of coding image scores was a partial reduction of semantic content analysis to what has been called sign vehicle

analysis (Lasswell, 1949, p. 65). Such analysis uses a set of sign vehicles as a representative of a semantic class (in this case, candidate images).

A positive evaluation occurred when coders determined that a sign vehicle referred to "an attribute of a current candidate's role, personality, or character" rather than to some entity that was not such an attribute. (Example: A coder watches a particular spot containing a reference to a candidates record of "telling the truth." The coder determines that the phrase "telling the truth" is on the sign vehicle list and that the phrase does in fact refer to a current candidate. Hence a positive evaluation is made and a score of one point is awarded to the image category where the coder judges such an attribution belongs for that commercial. In this way, semantic image content is measured.) In cases of negative references, (candidate does "not tell the truth,") a point is still awarded. Coders make negative evaluations and refrain from awarding a score only when an image reference is made about someone who is not a current candidate. (Example: "Leon Jaworski, an honest man who 'tells the truth' about George Bush, says . . . .")

DEVELOPMENT OF THE IMAGE CONSTRUCT

Delphi Panel

To construct a justifiable definition of candidate imagery an expert panel of four political scientists and a communication scholar familiar with political propaganda discourse generated a list of image terms contained in a 25% random subsample of advertisements (35 spots). This Delphi Panel (Cegala and Bassett, 1976, p. 228) watched commercials and wrote terms used in the advertisements which referred to candidate image attributes. In addition, the panel kept track of the frequencies with which terms were used.

After viewing, panel members discussed all terms used; a rationale then formed for using frequently-used terms as category divisions under which to subsume all other terms representing candidate images. A follow-up effort was then made by the researcher to expand the list made by the panel. Terms were selected from the remaining 75% of advertisements which were semantically similar to those selected by the panel but which were absent from the subsample viewed by the panel. This was done to certify that the image terms contained in the final sign vehicle list supplied to coders would fairly represent image terms contained in all 140 spots.

CLASSIFICATION SCHEME OF IMAGE CATEGORIES

The category divisions for all image sign vehicles consisted of the following eight headings.

1. Altruism
2. Competence
3. Experience
4. Honesty
5. Leadership
6. Personal Qualities
7. Strength
8. Other Special Qualities[1]

THE RELIABILITY OF CODER'S JUDGMENTS

The final sign vehicle list and category divisions were submitted to two coders (graduate students in advanced seminars in political communication) who viewed a 10% random subsample of commercials (14 spots) and independently assigned positively evaluated terms to categories. A reliability index was then computed using Scott's Pi (Scott, 1955, p. 321). The value of the reliability index was .7045. This value was deemed acceptable, and coding for all 140 commercials was completed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 reveals proportions of image mentions comparing Democratic and Republican parties, and the population, across all image categories. The total number of image mentions for all commercials was 383, over 30 percent of which belonged to the experience category. Next highest was the category of competence, with just over 15 percent of all mentions, followed by "other special qualities," with over 13 percent. The honesty category received 11.2 percent of all mentions, followed by leadership (10.4 percent) and strength (10.2 percent). Altruism, with only 7 percent of image mentions, and personal characteristics, with 2.1 percent, were last.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Democratic spots contained altruism scores in proportions substantially higher than that coded for republicans, (13.3 percent for democrats vs. only 2.7 percent republican spots). This outcome is partly due to many mentions in Democrat Kennedy's spots of "caring for the little guy," and Kennedy's compassion and understanding of personal problems (" . . . because he has suffered himself.")

The democratic dominance in the altruism category is nearly balanced out by the republican dominance in competence (only 10.1 percent of all image mentions in advertisements made on behalf of democrats went to images of competency, while in republican spots, nearly double that, or 19 percent were about competence). For both parties, the experience, leadership, and competence categories together accounted for over 55 percent of image mentions. Obviously there was a heavy emphasis in these areas by both parties. Such emphasis was partly due to claims by some of the more prominent candidates who

were running. For example, candidates Connally, Bush, Baker, and Kennedy's commercials underscored long active government service records and exploited their long-standing national visibility. These commercials often featured illustrious nationally-known track records of their subjects; for example references to Baker's Watergate experience, Connally's job as Secretary of the Treasury and his Texas governorship, and Bush's CIA work all featured candidates' experience in government on a national level.

For the category of strength, a substantially higher score accrued for commercials made on behalf of democrats than for that of republican candidates (16.4 percent of all democratic image mentions vs. only 5.8 percent of such mentions in republican's spots). One reason for this outcome is the constant mentioning in Carter spots that the incumbent was " . . . a solid man in a sensitive job."

Finally, over a fifth of all republican image mentions were references to "other special qualities." This was mainly due to Anderson's spots, which invariably featured an announcer's tag-line imploring viewers to "think about the Anderson difference." Clearly, here was an example of how an image category could be substantially affected by the repetition of a slogan.

Table 3 reveals the proportions of image mentions comparing candidates and population across all image categories. (Here the reader is cautioned that for some candidates, the overall number of image mentions may be small. For example, Reagan's spot contained a total of only four mentions; similarly, Brown's commercials had only 14 mentions, and Crane's only 12.)

Insert Table 3 About Here

As Table 3 shows, the altruism quality again seemed to break along partisan lines. The only republican's spots to have non-zero altruism scores were those of candidates Anderson and Baker, with low proportion scores of 6.3 percent and 5.4 percent of altruism mentions, respectively, compared to 7 percent for the population.

As for competence, the highest proportion of image mentions came from spots made on behalf of candidate Bush; over 39 percent of all Bush's image references were related to competence, with the population proportion less than half that magnitude (15.1 percent for population). No other candidates' spot exceed the population proportion for the competence category except for the spots of candidate Anderson whose score was only 15.9 percent of all image mentions. The inordinately high competence score for Bush's spots is explained by the presence of the slogan "George Bush will be a president we won't have to train" in many of his commercials.

As for experience, the commercials of candidates Bush, Carter, Connally, and Reagan contained proportion scores higher than that of the population (with 37.5 percent, 56.3 percent, 39.3 percent, and 75[2] percent of all mentions, respectively, vs 30.5 percent for the population). Of the remaining candidates, substantial experience scores were coded from Baker, Brown, and Kennedy's advertisements (with between a fifth and a quarter of all image mentions devoted to experience). Only candidates Anderson and Crane have comparatively insubstantial experience scores of 4.8 and 8.3 percent of image mentions, respectively. This outcome is explained by the fact that, of all candidates whose commercials were included for analysis, candidates Anderson and Crane were relatively lacking in national experience and visibility before the primaries. As Congressmen, these two candidates had mainly local backgrounds; hence, experience was not featured as prominently for them as it

was for many of their opponents, who were more in the national public eye as governors, and senators, and federal appointees to highly visible national offices. Therefore, these results are consonant with the political pasts and fortunes of the candidates who were competing for their parties' nomination. A similar trend in the treatment of candidates is seen with respect to the leadership category.

In summary, the major image references in commercials made on behalf of incumbent Carter were to his experience, strength and honesty. Reagan was also drawn as a man with great experience. Candidate Crane was characterized as brutally honest; Kennedy as a caring leader with strong personal qualities. Candidate Connally was characterized in line with his personae of Big John: a strong experienced leader. Candidate Bush was drawn as highly competent and experienced. Brown was characterized as strong, honest, and caring. Finally, Anderson was mainly portrayed as "different."

Most image references during the 1980 primaries were about experience (30.5 percent of all image mentions) and competence (15.1 percent). These outcomes reflected a nearly unanimous concern by candidates in the political system that the Carter administration had succeeded most in demonstrating general ineptitude; such a view was held by opponents of the incumbent from both parties. Candidates criticized Carter for being indecisive, and ineffective. Hence, it was not surprising that the qualities of experience and competence would be of prime concern to candidates in the 1980 campaigns. There is value in comparing the results of this analysis with data obtained independently and about salient images not inferred by the methods used here, but rather from other information available from the political system. Agreement among various sources constitutes what has become known as "multiple operationalism." (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 52). Such agreement aids in validity

arguments, since independent sources which concur indicate "that they assess the same underlying phenomena." (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 52). Here it may be said that the images of candidates were generally in agreement with expectations one would have with respect to specific candidates' varying strengths and weaknesses. For example, one expects candidates with the longer nationally recognized careers and more illustrious reputations to feature more references to experience than one would expect from candidates with lesser backgrounds. The analysis presented here agrees with this expectation. Similarly, one reasonably expects an incumbent to rely heavily on references to experience while running for re-election. Again, the analysis presented here is in agreement with this expectation. Similar outcomes lend further support to the claim that the methods employed in this analysis to tap candidate images were useful in reflecting accurately characteristics of candidates running for the nominatin during the campaign period.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The foregoing analysis requires remarks with respect to its inherent limitations. First, this study addressed only semantic (verbal) image phenomena and did so from a frequency measure rather than from a conceivably equally valid time based measure. To the extent that image phenomena are located in the temporal domain, this study did not explicate them. Furthermore, some image references were difficult to code, and, depending on interpretations of the text, could have been reasonably coded into more than one category. This was apparent in the case of a few image terms that could have been coded into either the leadership or the experience categories.

Finally, there is an obvious limitation of generalizibility to all televised political commercials. Since these data were only from the 1980 primaries, generalizing results to past and future campaigns is tenuous. However, the methods developed here can be used to assess image content in other campaigns. Succeeding analyses should strive to refine the classification scheme used in the present effort. Such research will increase in importance as America's leadership increases its use of political advertising in its efforts to win votes.

NOTES

[1]Altruism referred to candidates' concern or lack of it with the needs of others, including his benevolence and generosity. Competence referred to candidates' skill, knowledge, ability, and resources (or lack of them). Experience focused on candidates' past roles, jobs or accomplishments (or lack). Honesty referred to candidates' dignity, sincerity, candor, pr ;acl pf same. Leadership referred to candidates' guidance, stewardship, and direction, or lack of them. Personal qualities referred to candidates' indivdual unique traits, including youth, bravery, temperance, humor, faith or lack thereof. Strength referred to candidates' vitality, will, durability, etc. or lack. Finally "Other Special Qualities" referred to "charisma," "newness," or "niceness," of candidates or lack thereof.

[2]Small n here.

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TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION AND FREQUENCY OF ADVERTISEMENTS BY PARTY, CANDIDATE

Candidate	Last Office Held	Total # Ads	# 30 Sec. Spots	# 60 Sec. Spots
John B. Anderson * (R)	Rep. 16th District, Ill.	24	21	3
Howard H. Baker (R)	Senator, Tennessee	14	12	2
Edmund G. Brown, Jr. (D)	Governor, California	7	3	4
George Bush (R)	C I A Director	22	21	1
Jimmy Carter (D)	President, U. S.	18	13	5
John B. Connally (R)	Secretary, Treasury	15	11	4
Phil Crane (R)	Rep. 12th District, Ill.	9	9	0
Edward M. Kennedy (D)	Senator, Massachusetts	26	19	7
Ronald Reagan (R)	Governor, California	5	5	0
Party				
Republican		89	79	10
Democrat		51	35	16
Total		140	114	26

* R = Republican D = Democrat

TABLE 2

PROPORTIONS OF IMAGE MENTIONS COMPARING DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN PARTIES AND TOTALS (PERCENTAGES)

	Total *N = 383, **M = 8[illegible]	Democratic N = 158, M = 33.5	Republican N = 225, M = 49.5
Altruism	7.0	13.3	2.7
Competence	15.1	10.1	18.7
Experience	30.5	37.3	25.8
Honesty	11.2	11.4	11.1
Leadership	10.4	7.6	12.4
Personal	2.1	2.5	1.8
Strength	10.2	16.4	5.8
Other Qualities	13.3	1.3	21.8
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

*N = Total Number of Image Mentions

**M = Total Commercial Time in Minutes

TABLE 3

PROPORTIONS OF IMAGE MENTIONS COMPARING CANDIDATES AND POPULATION (PERCENTAGES)

	Pop. *N=383 **M=83	Anderson N=63 M=13.5	Baker N=37 M=8	Brown N=14 M=5.5	Bush N=48 M=11.5	Carter N=71 M=11.5	Connally N=61 M=9.5	Crane N=12 M=4.5	Kennedy N=73 M=16.5	Reagan N=4 M=2.5
Altruism	7.0	6.3	5.4	14.3	0	7.0	0	0	19.2	0
Competence	15.1	15.9	13.5	14.3	39.6	9.8	11.5	8.3	9.6	0
Experience	30.5	4.8	24.3	21.4	37.5	56.3	39.3	8.3	22.0	75.0
Honesty	11.2	6.3	2.7	28.6	8.3	11.3	9.8	75.0	8.2	25.0
Leadership	10.4	0	40.5	7.1	2.1	2.8	19.7	0	12.3	0
Personal	2.1	3.2	0	0	2.1	0	1.6	0	5.5	0
Strength	10.2	0	5.4	14.3	6.2	12.7	11.5	8.3	20.5	0
Other Qualities	13.3	63.5	8.1	0	4.2	0	6.5	0	2.7	0
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*N = Total Number of Image Mentions.
**M = Total Commercial Times in Minutes.